

The Heart of a Demon

by Breathing in Poison

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Summary: SLIGHT AU. "The heart of a demon holds no place for mercy," whispers Ansa. "No place for grief, for love, for guilt. No place for empathy. Only bloodlust." But if that is so, she thought, "Then why do I feel so terrible as this monster, this hapless Night Fury, wails its pain to the empty night sky?"

1. The Time for Death has Come

The Heart of a Demon

Chapter One: The Time for Death has Come

The shadows were shifting again.

Ansa hurried along the weather-beaten path, her knife clutched firmly in one hand. Her lungs, face, and fingers burned with cold, but she ignored it. She'd be longing for the cold soon enough.

Ansa crested the rise and stood as still as a deer, eyes peering warily into the night. The object under her scrutiny was a small Viking village, awash with torchlight, looking like a cluster of large wooden sheep huddling together. The image was peaceful, picturesque, in fact, but the sharp, green-eyed gaze of the girl showed that she was not convinced.

If one looked closely, then peered at the moon, like any sensible villager would, then they would see nothing. Nothing wrong. They would see a quaint little barbarian village glowing with firelight, sitting near a white-walled cliff that lead down to the sea.

But Ansa was neither an outsider nor a grizzled old seaman, and her eyes weren't fogged by drink or innocence. She saw what the others failed to see, and her eyes narrowed further when the pieces clicked into place.

A full moon, not yet to its zenith. The deceptive calm silence of the

night.

And the shadows, deeper, darker than they were ever in real life, shifting and tumbling over one another in a sea of swirling black ink.

Ansa's breath caught suddenly in her throat as the significance of the knowledge suddenly caught in her mind. She started racing to her house, her heart fluttering in her chest like the wings of a trapped bird.

"Dad! DAD!"

The sound of soft, whooshing wingbeats was carried to her on the wind. The girl cast a wild-eyed glance behind her, then increased her speed, panic adding fuel to her fire.

Only a few minutes 'til moonhigh.

A roaring column of flame raked over the houses down the center street, illuminating the night in a burst of angry red light. Screams, shouts of alarm rose from the buildings. Ansa abruptly changed course, aiming for a house near the southern end of the village, glancing up just in time to see a massive, vermillion body soar overhead on wings that looked like sheets of flame.

Only a Monstrous Nightmare, Ansa thought. I have time yet.

Ansa reached the house, extending one arm in front of her. A wave of heat washed over the back of her neck, and the resulting flare of light told her that the dragon had just made another pass.

Ansa threw the door open, slamming it shut as soon as she had hurled herself through the doorway. She cast her dagger onto the table and darted upstairs.

She never got to her room.

A loose floorboard caught her foot on the way to her bedroom and sent her sprawling, head slamming to the ground. When Ansa blinked blearily at the ceiling and attempted to shake the ringing from her ears, she just happened to glance sideways...

...and catch her reflection in her mother's looking-glass.

It was a rare beauty, the looking-glass, and a possession highly prized by her mother-while she was still alive, at least. After her mother's death, Ansa's father had shoved the mirror into a closet and buried it, grieving the loss of his wife. Ansa had no idea why the thing was sitting out in the hallway, in plain sight.

She got slowly to her feet, totally absorbed with the reflection she so rarely saw clearly. Her astounded gaze studied her dark brown, nearly black, hair, her emerald-green eyes, her pale, gaunt features. She didn't look all of her thirteen years- she looked both far older and far younger, as if life had grabbed her and forced her to age much faster than physically possible. Ansa shivered, then hastily pushed the looking-glass into her father's bedroom, rushing downstairs as fast as possible.

Moonhigh, and the Vikings totally oblivious to the looming threat.

Ansa grabbed her dagger and raced outside.

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She found her father quite easily, considering. All she had to do was follow the sound of the most obscene cursing, and voila. Father found.

Ansa's father was a rather large man with a tufty, mouse-brown beard and a rather unfortunate habit of wearing under pressure. The Villagers had elected him chief, but Ansa was pretty sure that Jaeger did little to no chief-ing whatsoever.

He was standing in the village square, cursing and waving a sword while a burly man attempted to read out the list of invading dragons.

"A collection of mostl'y Nightmares an' Nadders, sir, wi' a few Zipplebacks sight'ed a' well..."

"ODIN'S BLOODY BONES!" Screamed Jaeger. "I'LL TEAR THE LOT OF 'EM TE LI'LE BLOODY PIECES, OR I SWEAR BY FREYA'S AXE I WILL..."

"DA!" Roared Ansa. "I'VE GOT SOMETHING TO TELL YOU..."

"DAMNED FISH-HEADED MONSTER BIRDS!"

"DA! JUST LISTEN TO ME, WILL YA?"

Ansa kicked dear 'da' hard in the shin. The massive Viking roared in pain and whirled around, turning a wild-eyed gaze onto Ansa.

"ANSA!" He bellowed. "GE' BACK IN THE HOUSE! I GOT ENOUGH TE WORRY ABOUT WI'OUT GRINDIN' ME TEETH OVER YER' SAFETY..."

"DA!" Screamed Ansa. Her chest was heaving with the effort of out-shouting her father. "THE SHADOWS ARE SHIFTIN' AGAIN!"

All the fight went out of Jaeger at once. He turned a sickly pale color and stared, white-faced, at Ansa.

"By the love of Freya..." He whispered. He looked like he was about to faint. Then he whirled on the burly Viking. "Thor. Get the catapults ready. Now."

Thor protested. "Bu' sir, we c'n take 'em down wi'out the catapults..."

Jaeger grabbed Thor's shoulders and shook him roughly. "We ain't taken' down normal dragons, you moon blasted idiot! The shadows are movin' again! Don' ye look a' the moon?"

Thor's face paled. "Corr..."

Jaeger shook his head. "If I didn' have te already deal wi' a dragon raid..." He fixed a steely-eyed glare on Ansa. "Back to the house. Now."

Ansa nodded once and took off running.

But not back to the house.

The time of the Night Furies had come again, and this time, Ansa was determined to make her mark.

2. The Place of Shadows

The Heart of a Demon

Chapter 2: The Place of Shadows

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Left. Left. Right. First left. Right Again.

Ansa dove between the buildings, half-choking on the sulfurous, smoky air. The world was awash in yellow-orange light, tinting everything a sickly, pale color. Were the light didn't penetrate, shadows clung like clots of thick black wool, shimmering like the feathers of a raven.

Suddenly, all light was extinguished.

Ansa skidded to a stop and stared up at the sky, eyes wide. The moon was the only source of light, casting a slivery, serene glow over the half-burned Viking village. All the invading dragons stopped and jerked their heads to the sky, watching it intently. One let out a sharp cry, and then suddenly the sky was alive with panicking, screaming dragons. One, a Nadder, flew so close to Ansa that she had to duck into an abandoned doorway. She stared out into the night, puzzled, as the beasts streaked away into the darkness.

A loud, screaming whistle pierced the still night air. A purple firebolt exploded in a starburst of light, briefly illuminating the pitch-black Night Fury arrowing past sight range.

Ansa choked down the fear rising into her throat and hurried on.

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I may be no expert, Ansa thought. _But-are there less Night Furies than before?_

She ducked under the wreckage of a building just in time to avoid another fireball. The attack was fierce...but the attacks were thin and far between, as if less dragons had joined the battle ranks.

Her unease was swept away in a sudden rush of fury. _Good,_ she thought, glaring at the sky. _I hope all the gods-cursed monsters die a horrible death._

The dagger in her hand glinted. Ansa drew the blade against her palm and rubbed the blood on the boards next to her. Then she painted a small glyph on the back of her hand, wishing good luck and protection, and stood up.

Well, she thought wryly. _At least my blade is sharp._

She turned the corner...

...and arrived in the Place of Shadows.

End
file.